Independence

Why Americans and Indians Celebrate Differently

By MELISSA BELL

Summer is settling in. It is school vacation, long, heat-filled days and relaxed starlit nights. It's mangoes and monsoons in India; it's baseball and the beach in the United States. And, before you know it, in both places, it's Independence Day.

In America, that means the Fourth of July, or "corn dogs," "white pants," "friends," "picnics," "fireworks," "parties" and "catching fireflies in a jar." People become positively giddy over it: "It's all about stuffing your face with BBQ (barbecue) and picnic food. But it is also all about fireworks and patriotic songs!" Sophia Park gushes. Park, 28, is a law student who works in New York City, but plans to head to the beaches of Nantucket Island for the Fourth.

In India, it means August 15, or "official speeches," "the prime minister at the Red Fort," "problems in Kashmir," "flying kites all day," and "flags hung everywhere."

"Most people just sleep in late," Samrat Choudhury, a 30-year-old journalist from Shillong, muses cynically over a cup of *chai* in New Delhi.

Both days represent monumental occasions of freedom from British rule. Both symbolize vanquishing a colonial government. Both signify the beginning of independence. So why, then, are the celebrations so decidedly different?

The answer begins with a bit of history.

In India, at the stroke of midnight, on August 15, 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru welcomed the formation of the new country and the end of British rule. But it also marked the beginning of Partition, the forced migration of millions of friends and neighbors and the difficult transition to rule by the people's representatives over a large country still not wholly comfortable with unification.

At home in Mumbai, on vacation from her studies in the United States, Nayantara Kilachand, 25, says that the joy of independence is mixed with a deep-rooted sorrow. "Millions died. Hindus and Muslims were pitted against each other. And the British managed to take off with billions of dollars."

In the United States, on the other hand—though independence was earned through a bloody war—the day does not signify the end of that battle. Rather, it celebrates the day, July 4, 1776, that the 13 American colonies reached a unified decision that the war already being waged was for independence—not simply for improved treatment from the British king and Parliament. The day also celebrates the Declaration of Independence, a stirringly written, history changing document that has inspired freedom seekers in countries across the globe for 230 years.

From the start, men like John Adams (who became the second President of the United States) saw the day as a joyous celebration: the birthday of a nation in the minds of its citizens.

George Washington, the general who

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became the new nation's first President, celebrated by passing out more rum rations to his troops. The city of Philadelphia, the first national capital, set up huge bonfires in honor of the day.

The Indian government chose a more formal approach. In the shadow of the Red Fort, the prime minister hails the nation and there are flag-hoisting ceremonies in all states. There are no raucous celebrations, because, to many, it is a day to ponder what has been lost.

Nayanima Basu, 27, a reporter, says, "We got back a divided country, we lost a very rich culture and a major part of history was taken away from us." She has firsthand experience with the two celebrations because she spent one Fourth of July in Virginia while training with GE International.

The first 70 years of American celebrations had a somber edge to them as well. Though Independence Days were greeted with fireworks and bells ringing, people would gather to hear speeches about the fallen war heroes and sad songs were sung in honor of the fight for freedom.

But by the 1850s, Marian I. Doyle, a writer for *Early American Homes Magazine*, says the festivals had become less about remembering the fallen and the hard-won battle and more "a sideshow of peddlers, circus acts and crackling disruptions."

It is not surprising then that 230 years after Independence, many Americans view the day as nothing more than a good chance to celebrate summer and friendship. "It's basically just an excuse to have a big party," Katy Stafford laughs. Stafford, 28, attends Northwestern University in Illinois, but will spend the Fourth with a friend in Virginia. "We love a good theme party and this is just that: the red, white and blue outfits, the fireworks, someplace warm and all your friends."

Though Independence Day is also a national holiday in India, most people spend it in a laid-back manner. Choudhury grew up in the Northeast and says that people often stayed inside for safety. "Militants usually want to strike on days that are important to the country and Independence Day is the biggest day for them of all."

He says that the holiday will close down whole cities. Once, in Shillong, he walked through the middle of the market at 11 a.m. and didn't see another soul for four kilometers. "This is incredible in a country where you can't walk into a market without literally bumping into people."

Shawn Tao lives in Bristol, Rhode Island. The town council there says they have been hosting the oldest Fourth of July party, since 1788. Tao says the town decks itself in red, white and blue and prepares for days for the parades and fireworks. "People literally go nuts," says Tao.

India is yet to "go nuts" over its Independence Day. For some, that's as it should be, since the reminder of sacrifices made by past generations should linger over the celebrations. Basu, though only 27, gets angry at the "Bunty and Bubbly" attitude of the younger generation that takes its liberty for granted.

Others, though, like Ashwini Sharma, a 25-year-old filmmaker from Calcutta, says the sacrifices haven't been forgotten, but the joy has been. "I wish Indians would take part in an all-day dance marathon on Independence Day. Or do anything that expresses the joy that shook us as a nation 59 years ago. The feel, the trip of fighting for independence is all gone. There are many ways to find this." □

Melissa Bell *recently completed a two-month internship with the* Sunday Hindustan Times *in New Delhi and now works as a freelancer from San Diego, California.*

From left: Joey McGlamory and his wife, Karen, from Atlanta, Georgia, celebrate the Independence Day holiday on the beach at St. George Island, Florida.

Fireworks explode near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York on July 4, 2005.

The colors of the Indian flag were on display at the National Kite Flying Festival in Bangalore in 2005.

Spectators watch fireworks above India Gate in New Delhi on August 15, 1997, the 50th anniversary of India's independence.

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